

2008

# Understanding Autism: Exploring Society's Classification of the Autistic Body and the Representations of Autism in Literature and Film

Sydney Townes-Witzel  
*University of Redlands*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas\\_honors](https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors)

 Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Townes-Witzel, S. (2008). *Understanding Autism: Exploring Society's Classification of the Autistic Body and the Representations of Autism in Literature and Film* (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Redlands). Retrieved from [https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas\\_honors/45](https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors/45)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Honors Projects at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact [inspire@redlands.edu](mailto:inspire@redlands.edu).

Understanding Autism:  
Exploring Society's Classification of the Autistic Body and the Representations of  
Autism in Literature and Film

Sydney Townes-Witzel  
14 April 2008  
English Literature Honors Capstone

## Introduction

In the opening pages of Mark Haddon's 2002 novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Christopher Boone, the fifteen-year old protagonist, posits that "[...] proper novels [...] are lies about things which don't happen and they make me feel shaky and scared. And this is why everything I have written here is true" (Haddon 25; emphasis mine). Ostensibly a murder mystery, the novel nevertheless illuminates the multiply complex ways in which Christopher, "solves" not only the murder of the dog, but also produces some answers regarding the mystery of Asperger's Syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism, for the reader. Christopher, as someone with Asperger's and as someone who, as he claims to the police, "[...] always tells the truth" (23), then, can be seen as a reliable narrator of a representation of an experience of Asperger's.

In Clara Park's memoir, *The Siege* (1982), a similar cross-over between fiction and reality exists. As a memoir, it recounts the "true" story of Elly, an autistic, told from the perspective of her mother, Clara. As such, it readily fits into the emerging genre of narratives of autism, which attempt to capture and lead us into the life of the autistic world and produce a representation of autism.

Representations of autism are not limited to novels and can include other mediums such as film. The movie *Rain Man* (1988) presents a plot about Dustin Hoffman's character, Raymond Babbit, an autistic savant which means he has an incredible talent, in this case a recall of information such as numbers. Movies can be taken as the absolute storyline despite possible inaccuracies. The knowledge that movies are a creation of an entertainment institution and therefore produced with a slanted

perspective is rarely thought about. Rather, a fictional character such as Raymond Babbit becomes the connoted figure with the word autism and is the figure society identifies when “autism” is heard.

In all cultural representations, the reality of the experiences of autistics is mediated through language. Regardless if the discourse occurs on the page or on the screen, language is used to empower, disempower or otherwise represent and, once again, imagine the world of autism. Thus, language becomes a function of authorial power and privilege. As the autistic world is subjected through language, a false impression is created that individuals with autism have in a monolithic experience. In other words, by collapsing the vast spectrum of autistic disorders into a singular category of “autistic”, it becomes too easy to claim that all autistics confront similar obstacles and experience the world uniformly. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us as good readers to examine the ever growing representations of autism in the literary world not by looking at individual texts, but rather to read them in dialogue with one another. Thus, we can then come to a more holistic understanding of the autism spectrum disorders. This essentially means that novels such as Haddon’s and Park’s must be read collectively to demonstrate the multiple experiences that exist.

My first introduction to disabilities was when my younger cousin was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. The medical discourse surrounding Cerebral Palsy was debilitating and could only point out what my cousin was incapable of doing. As such, attempting to understand disabilities and promoting awareness has become a passionate area of mine and has led me to research autism including the exploring the multiple representations of autism. In discussing autism and representations, the language I use is influenced by the



medical discourse, and other discourses of autism that I have been exposed to. My position in this discourse is framed by what I have read, heard, and perceived. Thus, my participation in this discourse and my argument in this paper to read narratives collectively can only be taken as a suggestion.

In this paper, I argue that society has classified autism as a single experience and have falsely promoted that individuals have “an autistic experience”. I claim that no single, true experience such as this can exist for “truth” is an ever evolving ideal in discourse. The concept of “an autistic experience” is what society constructs, reproduces and essentially what society gives credit to as a representation of autism. Therefore, no actual set standard of an experience exists since each individual has his own experience. In countering the concept that a “true autistic experience” exists, I examine the works of Mark Haddon and Clara Park as limited representations.

When novels such Park’s or Haddon’s are read independently with the thought that one “truthful” version of the autistic experience exists, an incomplete understanding of autism results. Park’s memoir reduces the autistic experience to only Elly’s world. In addition, Park limits her own daughter by a linguist prison-house. As the narrator and with the power to initiate discourse, Park is able to construct an identity of Elly for the reader. Haddon’s novel is a little less problematic for it attempts to recognize Christopher’s specific high-functioning disorder rather than generally categorize him into the autistic umbrella term. Reading these two novels in conjunction demonstrate that no single autistic standard experience exists. Therefore, representations of autism are insufficient if viewed individually and in contrast the diversity of representations must be read as a composite experience. Such focused readings disempower the idea of

understanding a collective disorder. However, a more accurate portrayal of autism can be interpreted if the forms of experience are thought of collectively. Each representation of autism has value such as Haddon's novel that attempts to give voice to an individual with autism or Park's novel that reveals the hardships and frustrations of a having a family member with autism. And overall, representations hold significance for they publicize and are spread awareness on the issues of autism. However, despite these positive aspects limitations certainly exist.

The restrictive aspects of representations of autism will be exemplified in two narratives of autism, one fiction form and one memoir as well as a film. I will draw from key works in disability studies, Michel Foucault's work on disciplining the body, and theories of representation to examine how disabled bodies are trained to become more docile bodies. Foucault's formulation of "docile bodies" is a concept of a body that is subjected and trained that can be utilized to accomplish societal objectives. This idea is especially instrumental in that it enables us to analyze the ways in which the "disabled body" of the autistic is subjected – socially, politically, culturally, and historically in order to become a "docile body". In examining the narrative construction of the autistic "docile body" in both texts, I will look at how individuals are limited linguistically as well as the amount of voice each author contributes to the character with autism. However, in order to examine representations of autism, one must have a basic foundation of the disorder itself.

### **Autism Background**

Representations of autism taken individually can only provide a partial understanding. One main reason that singular experiences do not do complete justice is that autism is a complex neurobiological disorder on a spectrum of disorders known as PDD, pervasive developmental disorders. As the most common diagnosis on the spectrum, the label “autistic” is at times misused. The PDD title forms an umbrella category of five individual disorders: autism, Asperger’s disorder, Rett’s disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and PDD-NOS (PDD-not otherwise specified) (DSM-IV-TR). The various types of disorders on the spectrum complicate a uniform definition of autism. Furthermore, clinical cases can range from mild to severe, recognized as low functioning to high functioning, which indicates that the specific diagnosis of autism is broad and can apply to multiple experiences.

The term “autism” was first introduced into the English language by Dr. Leo Kanner who observed a disorder in children that dealt largely with social contact (Autism Awareness Association Inc.) Kanner termed the disorder as “autism” based on the Greek root “auto” which means self. What Kanner saw in individuals with the disorder was an ability to disregard reality and withdraw into a world solely of the individual. The manifestation of the disorder evolved through a series of observations that Kanner himself made.

### **Understanding Autism in the Context of Disability Studies**

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the word “disability” in the context of social, political and cultural settings. The term “disability” easily implies a form of impairment. The concept of impairment has only developed a negative

connotation from medical discourse that views impairment as a concern for treatment and cure (Barnes and Oliver, 2002). Disability studies therefore attempts to discuss disability in discourses other than medical terminology. The field is wide ranged and has come to include all persons of disabilities. Although the experiences of individuals within such a category are diverse, they have all been classified and excluded from society which causes for the generalization of “disability studies”. One of the disabilities explored in disability studies is autism, which is just one of the multiple disorders in the academic discipline.

As a realm for impairment experiences to be expressed, shared and studied, disability studies examines how autism is socially constructed and how those with autism are affected with the stigma placed on the disorder. The historical development of autism began with a negative connotation when Dr. Kanner diagnosed several disturbed children who differed from normal, typical developing children. Rather than examine Dr. Kanner’s set of symptoms in speech and social impairments, disability studies reads into how the autism category is constructed through culture and society and how it is maintained (Marks, 11).

In the investigation of autism within disability studies, autism is recognized as an additional aspect of an individual rather than the defining marker, “‘Disabled person’ is used to draw attention to the centrality of disability in individual identity; ‘person with a disability’ conveys the idea that having a disability is secondary to the people’s identity as human beings” (Taylor, Shoults and Walker, 2003). The attachment of autism as part of one’s identity results from society’s constructions and representations which can empower or disempower the individual’s impairment. Narratives of autism are a

prominent area to explore theories of disability studies to understand how the concept of the disabled as well as the autistic is constructed in society.

### **Narratives of Autism: How They Function**

In “Remains of the Dog”, a review article published in The New York Times (2003), Jay McInerney describes the novel’s ability to serve as a portal into the autistic world and the power of representation of such a world:

Haddon manages to bring us deep inside Christopher’s mind and situates us comfortably within his limited severely logical point of view, to the extent that we begin to question the common sense and the erratic emotionalism of the normal citizens who surround him, as well as our intuitions and habits of perceptions (1).

If we as readers begin to “question the common sense [...] and our own intuitions and habits of perception” then we have replaced part of our reality and surroundings with that of Haddon’s fictitious novel. We take Christopher’s words to be the accurate statements, expressions, thoughts, observations, and interpretations of an autistic individual. At this point, Haddon’s novel reproduces an experience of autism on its readers in the same way that *Rain Man* constructs a sense of autism on its viewers:

It's not just a book about disability. Obviously, on some level it is, but on another level . . . it's a book about books, about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book. Here's a character whom if you met him in real life you'd never, ever get inside his head. Yet something magical happens when you write a novel about

him. You slip inside his head, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world (<http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html> ).

Books are a medium to transform our understanding and in novels such as Haddon's, they are forms of facilitated communication. The novels can communicate a concept of autism to the rest of society with the facilitated help of the author or narrator. We are supposed to "slip inside his head" as or be brought "deep inside Christopher's mind" through Haddon's language.

### **Categories of the Narratives**

As narratives are published alongside a medical discourse, two distinct voices evolve. In an essay titled "Autism: Speculation, Knowledge or Understanding?", Tom Billington outlines the concept of two types of novels: those written by autism professionals and those that are insiders that have a diagnosis of the disorder (2006). Billington is a former educational psychologist who has focused on the excluded child and published such books *Separating, Losing and Excluding Children: Narratives of Difference* (2000) (Sellick, 2007). His work poses questions to regarding power with respect to disorders as well as questions of understanding and communication.

To live and experience the disorder potentially provides such inside authors with an advantage in the overall objective of an attempt "to understand and represent the reality of lived experience" (Billington, 2006). Thus, one case demonstrates knowledge while the other attempts understanding (Billington, 2006). Knowledge is displayed through the "medicalized narrative" which allows for the simplistic identification of a problem and the ability to secure it within language through categorization. Using *The*

*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* as an example, Billington believes such a novel deviates from medical terminology and attempts to represent an experience: “Literature has often provided the means to articulate functions of the mind as yet unknowable through any scientific discourse”(Billington, 2006). Hence, published novels as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* become the autism handbook for the novice public.

Although Billington’s analysis runs parallel to the concept of multiple discourses as seen in popular culture and Dr. Kanner’s medical terminology, his analysis easily overlooks a third category of narrative, the group that contains parents of an autistic or an individual with great exposure to autism. Billington’s categories only allows for two possible projections: one that attempts understanding of an unknown situation or experience and one that displays overseeing knowledge. Thus narratives in memoir form such as *The Siege* have their own separate category and fit somewhere in between Billington’s concepts of knowledge and understanding. Regardless of what is displayed through a narrative, who writes the representation or the tone of the narrative, they all are unified creating a construct of autism that targets the autistic body. The body becomes a significant component in the discourse of autism for it is the very thing that is labeled as disabled or impaired.

### **Construction of the Body through Language**

Novels such as Haddon’s and Park’s and movies such as *Rain Man* are physical evidence that society constructs a concept of autism. This system that functions on observing and constructing is analogous to Foucault’s concept of the panopticon that

utilizes visibility as a form of discipline and construction. In Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault explains the philosopher, Jeremy Bentham's panopticon which is an institution of discipline, a building that is described as a building with light and windows that uses visibility as a trap (Foucault, 200). The shadow of the tower always exists, producing a sense of constant invisible presence: "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 201). The main objective as the passage states is to produce a sensation of a constant gaze, which produces "correct" behavior. The prisoner is constantly regulated and disciplined by the guard's gaze that watches over him. However, the prisoner can never fully see the guard, but knows that guard is present and has the power to stare down at the prisoner. Thus, out of anxiety, the prisoner imagines he is still being watched even if the guard leaves. The visualization then becomes internal which increases self-regulation. The prisoner is subjected through the structure of the institution. The panopticon has no determined location indicating that such an institution can exist anywhere including modern day society.

In today's society, the tests that individuals of autism are subjected to are a form of panopticon, a form of discipline that regulates the behavior of the to make autism visible in the same way that guards of the panopticon attempt to make the prisoner's status as prisoner visible. Once an individual's feels the sensation of being observed, he begins to self-regulate himself to be a more productive asset to society in fear of further discipline. When a body becomes subjected and transforms into a more usable form, the body becomes a docile body. Doctors attempt to make a patient's autism visible so that self-discipline can begin in order to produce a more docile body. The construction takes



place upon the body in order to build it and form it into a locus of control (Foucault, 137). The whole concept is the idea of constructing normalcy with the help of disciplinary action. Therefore, disciplinary actions become the means to produce productive bodies that can contribute to society:

The systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment [...] it is always the body that is at the issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission (Foucault, 25).

Punishment does not have to be violent in order to target the body. The body, as Foucault discusses, is simply at the center of the discussion. Novels and films are systems of punishment that reinforce a concept of the disabled body. A re-produced image of an autistic subject such as in *Rain Man* may not be violent, as the passage indicates, but the body and the image of the disabled body is still the prime issue.

However, when discussing visibility, subjection, and observation an inequitable conversation occurs between the observer such as the doctor and the observed subject, in this case the individual with autism. The doctor’s position in society as a labeled “expert” authorizes him to speak which consists of academic language and often in academic journals. However, few individuals of autism will read those published journals which means the discourse is one sided and the person with ASD has no voice. Clearly, a hierarchal system is produced between the observer and the observed subject, which thus empowers the observer with the ability to initiate and control discourse. Society’s understanding of autism thus develops from a discourse manipulated by authorial power.

The authorial power is able define what is considered normal and abnormal by segregating autistics from mainstream society and excluding them from actively participating in discourse.

Distinctions between us as normal and “others” are constant in our society. The identification of “normal” is made in order to comprehend or attempt to comprehend these groups of “others”. Such inclinations are due to our very language that constitutes binominal thinking. Special education classrooms are in multiple institutions and special transportations are commonly seen and marked by their distinct size. Schools are one of Foucault’s examples of disciplinary institutions in society which are mechanisms of power to break down, rearrange, organize and analyze objects into docile bodies (Foucault, 143). Other forms of subjection occur aside from special education classrooms. Often the buses that provide transportation for disabled children are shorter in size and are often referred to as the “short bus” in mainstream society and culture. On seeing a short bus passing by, it is too easy to assume that that the bus is filled of children with special needs. Thus, society has come to associate the people on the bus as disabled through a signifier, in this case, the short bus. Such an observation is a direct example of Foucault’s panopticon for it causes a self-disciplinary gaze. Assumptions that the “short bus” holds people with disabilities causes a type of self-regulation where typical developing individuals continue “correct behavior” to remain disassociated from the “short bus” and any disability. Thus individuals desire to stay away from what is denoted in society as abnormal because of our own connotations. The observer empowers himself with knowledge and power to subject the autistic individual. In a sense, the observer makes the disability visible through a created relationship with the short bus or special

education classroom. Language develops around identified associations and as authorial, academic figures such as doctors have the reins to control discourse, the knowledge that is disseminated is limited.

### **The Narratives: Authorial Power and Language**

#### *The Siege*

*The Siege* is presented to the reader from the perspective of Clara Park, the mother, rather than Elly, the child with autism. Park has thus nominated herself to be the voice behind the story despite the fact that the story she is sharing is Elly's. Just as a doctor's title serves as an authorial leverage to initiate and control discourse, Park's status as a typical developing adult and the mother of Elly positions her as the authoritative figure over Elly. Elly is not only a child with less societal power than her mother, but the autistic disorder physically positions her as inferior to her mother in the linguistic sense because of the speech impairment. In publishing *The Siege*, Park not only produces the discourse on autism constructing an understanding of autism, but she makes Elly's autism visible in her descriptions:

One speaks to her, loudly or softly. There is no response. She is deaf, perhaps. That would explain a lot of things – her total inattention to simple commands and requests [...] Twenty-two months. Still not walking, talking, or responding to speech (4).

Elly cannot make typical milestones for her age and this is what Park uses to show Elly's condition as well as position in the hierarchal system. With impairments in both verbal and non-verbal communication, Elly is categorized as abnormal. The first chapter of *The*

*Siege* is titled “The Changeling” which gives Elly the category as basically subhuman. However, this language that revolves around inabilities and abnormality belongs to Park, not Elly. Using her own language, Park chooses to narrate an experience that does not even belong to her:

How much did she take in of the world around her? Almost nothing, it appeared. There she moved, every day, among us but not of us, acquiescent when we approached, untouched when we retreated. Existing among us, she had her being elsewhere (12).

“How much did she take in of the world around her? Almost nothing, it appeared” displays how the autistic world is presented through Park’s language. The statement that Elly takes little in from the world around her is based off what *appeared*, essentially Park’s observation. Park’s observation of Elly functions as the foundation for the *The Siege*. The novel and our impression of Elly and the autistic experience are constructed through the words of Park rather than Elly’s, “As I [Clara Park] describe, I articulate. I imply relationships. I cannot avoid doing this [...] I must analyze, and as I analyze I falsify. Experience as analyzed is no longer experience as lived” (87). Park narrates an experience as an attempt to understand her daughter’s autism and hence she “describes” and must analyze”. However, the way Park represents her daughter’s autistic world with analysis and articulations are exactly what her daughter is incapable of doing due to her language impairments. Therefore, the end result of her representation is falsification. She has produced a false construction of the experience because the experience is altered through her narration. Thus Park clearly states in this passage the difference between her analysis of the autistic world and the life of the experienced.

With her ability to publish her memoir, Park is able to construct a sense of autism for society that excludes Elly's perspective. The novel not only literally inhibits Elly from expressing her story, it also figuratively traps Elly in a construct of disability. Park is able to formulate a sense of normal and abnormal in terms of how we think of Elly, "we are a bookish family. She too likes books. Rapidly, expertly, decisively, she flips the pages, one by one by one [...] Rapidly, with uninterrupted rhythm, the pages turn" (3). This passage begins with a statement to sum up the Park family: "*We are a bookish family*". The second statement, "she too likes books," is an effort to place Elly within the family. A sense of normalcy is placed upon the Park family who reads books while Elly is distinct from the rest of the "bookish family" and is thus distanced and displaced. The language that develops and arises in the discussion of autism often produces a defined segregation of abled-bodies versus disabled bodies as was seen with the Park family:

The prefix *dis* connotes separation, taking apart, sundering in two. The prefix has various meanings such as not, as in *dissimilar*; absence of, as in *disinterest*; opposite of, as in *disfavor* [...] (Linton, 30).

The prefixes such as *dis* that are used in discourse about characters such as Elly produce a specific social arrangement (Linton, 31). Establishing autism as a *disability* automatically emphasizes the broken body and its inabilities which is thus placed at a lower social position for it is considered less functioning. The social arrangement positions individuals such as Elly as less than normal and less capable, which reflects her construction as an individual with autism.

With Elly identified as disabled, as abnormal, as everything the rest of the Park family is not, it becomes the objective of the Park family to construct her into a

functional member of the family, a normal member. This goal to convert Elly into a more human version is a form of discipline. With regard to Foucault, discipline becomes the mechanism which individual bodies become functional to society. The overall objective of society is to maintain power to write history socially, culturally and politically. These objectives drive society to produce bodies functional to the production of society. With respect to *The Siege*, discipline comes in the format of a narrative that attempts to inscribe a notion of “normalcy” upon Elly. Language is used as an attempt to produce a more functional body:

Confronted with a tiny child’s refusal of life, all existential hesitations evaporate. We had no choice. We would use every stratagem we could invent to assail her fortress, to beguile, entice, seduce her into the human condition (12).

Park’s language re-inforces Foucault’s ideas of the “docile body”. Elly’s disabled body becomes subjected in order to produce a more “docile body”. The words in Park’s passage “beguile”, “assail”, “seduce” all are violent words that create an image of invasion. An image of invasion formulates two sides, often including “the other” and the rest of society. In the case of the *The Siege*, the two sides opposed are Elly and the Park family, the rest of society. As an attempt to conquer Elly’s world and assimilate her into the human condition and the normal world:

I came to see too that discipline, too, is a kind of communication. Negative though it is, it sets up a relationship of mutual expectation. A normal child needs this assurance of order and predictability, but it can survive without it. [...] For a child suffering from the autistic syndrome is essential (110).

Discipline is a necessary means for Park to bring her daughter in the normal world. Communication between Elly's word and Park's world is established in Park's terms and which places Park as the authorial figure, "...it sets p a relationship of mutual expectation". Park concludes what is best for Elly and more broadly, what is best for any child suffering from autism. *The Siege* is Park's familial attempts to bring Elly into the family and to produce a functional body out of Elly's disabled body, "Every exercise we devised to extend Elly's use of her body, her eyes, her ears, her voice, her mind, worked in addition to breach that jealously guarded isolation" (Park, 88). The notion of the "self-absorbed child" is reproduced with Park's dialogue of Elly's world. A "relationship of mutual expectation" expresses Foucault's concepts of the observer and the observed subject. Such a relationship undoubtedly demonstrates Park's authorial position in comparison to Elly. While Park directly inscribes a sense of the "docile body" on Elly's disabled body, Haddon differs in his representation of the autistic experience in giving voice to Christopher and the "disabled other".

### *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Haddon has a less problematic representation of the autistic experience in his novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, than Park does in *The Siege* because he does not identify himself as the sole voice of the experience. He nominates Christopher, a character with Asperger's, to share the experience with and thus produces some agency for Christopher to speak through. If the novel were written in the narrative of Christopher's father, the affect would have been similar to Elly's mother's interpretation of the autistic world. As a fictional character, Christopher is an appendage

of Haddon's work. Since the novel is a work of Haddon's imagination, he as the author has the ability to control the language and discourse of autism and Christopher. Thus, Haddon has the choice to either empower or disempower Christopher's experience. Regardless of his decision, Haddon is the voice behind Christopher and produces the discourse and overall, constructs the reader's understanding of Asperger's.

An understanding of ASD is built upon Christopher's behavior and interactions within the novel most of which involve miscommunication and failed discourse with other members of society. The reason he fails at understanding jokes and metaphors is because he does understand how language functions in that context:

I find people confusing. This is for two main reasons. This first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words [...] The second main reason is that people often talk using metaphors. These are examples of metaphors

**They had a skeleton in the cupboard.**

**We had a real pig of the day.**

I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards (Haddon, 19-20).

The above quote demonstrates Haddon's perspective on autism as represented through limitations in language. Metaphors are a figure of speech that is common in the English language however Christopher finds these as insignificant and pointless. In his logical and mathematical mind, metaphors are essentially lies. His mental process illustrates his lack of imagination and inflexibility, which are two criteria used for diagnosing autism. As Haddon is author behind the novel and has written the dialogue for



Christopher, it becomes clear that Christopher's language belongs to someone else. Assuming that Haddon as a writer understands metaphors and expressions of communication, we can recognize that the language that Haddon chooses to narrate the story cannot be wholly Christopher's. This is displayed when Christopher lists his "behavioral problems" such as screaming when he is confused or angry (Haddon, 59). Christopher describes his actions as "behavioral problems"; however, the terminology "behavioral problems" sounds of medical language. Thus, Christopher has co-opted the medical discourse to describe his behavior, actions and thought processes. The limitation of Haddon's representation becomes apparent as it becomes evident that the language he uses ultimately reinforces the de-habilitating and limiting medical terminology.

Despite Christopher's status as a fictional character, Haddon still makes Christopher's diagnosis visible. The writing of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* demonstrates what Haddon believes is Christopher's thought process which consists of logical thinking:

People often say 'Be quiet,' but they don't tell you how long to be quiet for. Or you see a sign which says **KEEP OFF THE GRASS** but it should say **KEEP OFF THE GRASS AROUND THE SIGN** or **KEEP OFF ALL THE GRASS IN THIS PARK** because there is lots of grass you are allowed to walk on (38).

The syntax is said to "supposedly represent Christopher" because Christopher is a mere figure of Haddon's imagination. Although the thought process around "be quiet" and "keep off the grass" are meant to belong to Christopher, a level of uncertainty exists because Christopher is only fictional. The novel could have been written in the narrative

of Christopher's father, which would have been similar to Elly's mother's interpretation of the autistic world. The passage regarding the grass could have described Christopher as he was observed staring at the sign in the grass. However, Haddon attempts to enter Christopher's mind within the autistic world rather than narrate the family journey into the autistic world. Such a decision is questionable as Haddon himself does not have a autism diagnosis which limits his ability to "describe" and "articulate" as was seen with Park's memoir. Within the novel, Christopher's disorder is never outright explained or referred to directly. Only on the back cover in the summary of the novel does it state that Christopher has an ASD diagnosis. Haddon makes Christopher's Asperger's observable through descriptions of abnormal behavior in a similar manner of Park's descriptions of Elly:

I used to think that Mother and Father might get divorced [...] This was because of the stress of looking after someone who has Behavioural Problems like I have [...] These are some of my Behavioral Problems

- A. Not talking to people for a long time
- B. Not eating or drink anything for a long time
- C. Not liking being touched
- D. Screaming when I am angry or confused
- E. Not liking being in really small places with other people
- F. Smashing things when I am angry or confused (Haddon, 59).

From this passage, Christopher's behavior and disorder is made evident and hence society can identify Christopher as abnormal. If the overall goal of making the disorder visible is self-regulation, the above passage suggests that Christopher is aware of his

differences for he lists his behavioral problem. However, Haddon produces the language and discourse for Christopher which consequently means Haddon attempts to transform Christopher's disabled body into a more docile one. Haddon and Park are in the authorial position to initiate discourse and publicize their concepts of the autistic experience, however the experiences are only one sided.

### **Limitations of Discourse**

The language in a movie is an excellent example of how a concept is constructed socially and in terms of popular culture. The way a certain issue such as autism is treated within the discourse of the movie and the direction of the plot all influence the take home message and attitude toward the topic. For example, *Rain Man* creates the idea that the autistic experience is marked by an individual with distinct repetitive behavior but remarkable genius. When the word "autism" is mentioned in society, the image of Dustin Hoffman's face and amazing gambling skills is summoned to our thoughts. Such connotation demonstrates the direct link between language and representation and what is signified in a word. Politics, society and popular culture such as in the case of *Rain Man* all have the power to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct a readily held understanding of a concept such as autism. Furthermore, these re-constructions become inscribed into popular culture and come to be seen as the reality of autism. What was an initial definition of symptoms develops into a character played by Dustin Hoffman who has a photographic memory and who is brilliant with numbers. The public's understanding of autism becomes dependent on the producers and actors in the movie and thus causes a limited discourse for understanding.

Popular culture is limited in discourse because only a select few have input on the representation. Medical language on autism is also limited because the initial symptoms of the diagnosis were outlined by only Dr. Kanner. The medical discourse is also limited to an astute few such researchers, doctors and professors. In medical terms, a diagnosis of autism is presented as an individual's inabilities in communication, social situations and so on. Essentially, the language presents the disorder as what an individual lacks. Just as limitations are seen in medical terminology and movie productions, representations in such as memoirs and fictional novels are limited with respect to their authors, publishing houses, and reviewers.

### **The Authenticity of the Narrative**

In order to understand the power novels have to construct or deconstruct our concept of autism, novels such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* must be questioned for their authenticity for they are indeed fiction. Fictional writing as a representation of an existing disorder brings in the concern of authenticity. This is not to suggest a singular, authentic story of autism exists. However, fiction suggests a degree of imagination. In the case of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the imagination stems from Haddon's mind. Thus, the audience reads a version of autism that was conjured up in the single mind of Haddon. The issues of "truths" and experience with regard to narratives of autism parallel an essay titled "The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank (1960)", in which Bruno Bettelheim inspects the issues of authenticity and representation. And although his essay examines the Frank family and reception of performances and publications of *The Diary of Anne Frank* rather than issues of autism, it inspects the

reality of an experience. Bettelheim's work is additionally pertinent to the study of representations of autism for he had his own theories on autism. Bettelheim was the director of the Ortho-genic School for disturbed children and took on the belief that autism was a result of unstimulating environments in the first crucial years of a child's life. Thus, the blame for autistic children was directed towards mothers who Bettelheim labeled "refrigerator mothers" for their coldness and their inability to establish a bond with their child (Simpson, Hanley and Quinn). With Bettelheim's background with autism, his essay on the lessons learned from a piece of text becomes applicable in recognizing the lessons that can be learned from narratives of autism.

Bettelheim proposes in his essay that the lessons of humanity and hope derived from the diary are inappropriate due to the knowledge of Frank's fate and the treatment of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. The essay goes on to claim that the audience has taken away the wrong lessons out of denial of the reality of the cruelty that occurred, "the world-wide acclaim given her story cannot be explained unless we recognize in it our wish to forget the gas chambers, and our effort to do so by glorifying the ability to retreat into an extremely private [...] world" (36). Thus, Frank's depiction of her isolated world is a haven from reality. A similar haven exists in narratives of autism that often protects autistic characters from their inabilities.

Messages of triumph and overcoming difficulty for the disabled individual can be read from autistic narratives in the same way that lessons of humanity and hope can be lifted out of Frank's diary. The reality of the disorder such as the speech delay or social impairment is disregarded. Rather, the ideas of hope for the individual are encouraged. According to Bettelheim, these lessons of hope for the human kind are the wrong lesson

learned in the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Such attention to the diary is due to a falsified faith that has become the lesson of the diary:

But the fictitious declaration of faith in the goodness of men [...] falsely reassures us since it impresses on us that in the combat between Nazi terror and continuance of intimate family living the latter wins out (40).

The focus turns away from the harsh reality of the internment camps, Auschwitz and the Nazis, and pushes us to examine the life of a young girl and her survival. The disregard for the reality of an issue such as the Holocaust causes what Bettelheim terms “the wrong lesson learned”. Such wrong lessons can be derived on multiple issues such as autism and disability not just the Holocaust.

### **The Narratives: Wrong Lessons**

#### *The Siege*

In the same way that lessons of humanity and hope can be lifted out of Frank’s diary, messages of triumph for the disabled individual can be read from narratives of autism. The complete title of Park’s novel is *The Siege: A Family’s Journey into the World of an Autistic Child* which suggests that the outcome of the novel, the lesson to be learned will be derived from a family perspective. The last section of the novel is an epilogue titled “Fifteen Years After” that looks at how far Elly has come since the reader’s first introductions to her. The epilogue consists of series of activities she *can* do until eventually the *can dos* overwhelm the initial *cannots*, “Month by month she grows, and year by year, milestones frequent enough now so I no longer record them all” (284). As the narrator, Park maneuvers the reader through the journey of Elly’s autistic world.

The epilogue functions as an escape from the maintained diagnosis. On first hearing the diagnosis of autism, Park classified it as the worst possible:

I had a horror of retardation [...] I had thought that retardation was the worst thing that could happen to a baby, a family, and to me. But apparently this was not the worst possibility. There was another. The worst diagnosis he could give us would be a different world altogether – autism (33).

Elly's diagnosis of autism has not changed nor will it change regardless of the milestones that she makes. The reality of the diagnosis confronts Park with each incapability or impairment. However, through focusing on possible hope and small accomplishments, Park can disregard the diagnosis and encourage the reader to see the potential for humanity. Just as wrong messages can be picked up from *The Siege*, Haddon's novel can be read for the wrong messages as well.

### *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Haddon's novel can be read for Christopher's success in solving the murder mystery of his neighbor's dog or his ability to overcome his resistance of social interactions to find his mother. These messages parallel lessons on humanity that readers have taken away from reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in that they discount the reality of the issue. Bettelheim, who explored the lessons learned from *The Diary of Anne Frank*, would find the lessons of Christopher's ability to prevail in a difficult search for his mother to be the wrong messages in the novel. In applying this to the novel, we are confronted with Christopher's status as an autistic subject but are pushed to ignore the disorder and examine the life of Christopher in respect to the dog murder mystery. Just as

how our attention stays focused on Frank's inspiring words on mankind, we are encouraged to focus on the personal conquest of the autistic rather than the unforgiving reality of our social constructs of the disabled body and our categories of abnormal and normal.

### **What the Narratives Offer Independently**

As both novels elicit the mysterious world of the autistic, they both result in "normalization" of the autistic individual and promote the previous perceived notions of autism back on the autistic individual. Each representation falls short of justice in producing incomplete concepts of autism due to limited discourse, language controlled by the authorial figure and misunderstood lesson. However, this is not to say that there is nothing of value in representations of autism. Each portrayal of autism be it a novel, memoir or film has a valuable aspect to it. In examining each narrative, a significant aspect is found that empowers and does justice to autism.

Despite Park's domination in discourse, *The Siege* shows an important aspect of familial relations that is relevant in understanding autism. A mother's story of her journey through her daughter's autism should not be dismissed immediately for its limitations in voice. Park quite possibly had positive intentions in showing a world often closed off to the minds of typical developing adults. This is where the potential lies, in the ability of narratives to empower the experiences of autism. The reader gains an idea of autism from a memoir such as *The Siege* and can gain another from a fictional novel such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.



Haddon's novel specifically addresses Christopher's disorder as Asperger's rather than using a generalizing umbrella term. Identifying the diagnosis as a specific type is a positive step in countering the societal construct that only one experience exists and that all individuals with autism are alike. Haddon also attempted to write the novel in the mind of Christopher which proceeds with logical and mathematical thinking. Although the novel can only give the reader a limited understanding, the idea of incorporating Christopher as the narrator and providing the individual with voice is an important aspect that empowers the individual with autism.

With films such as *Rain Man*, the positive aspect exists in using a medium well received by a large percentage of society that can add to a person's understanding of autism. Even though *Rain Man* cannot provide a completely justifiable version of autism, individuals with autism with extreme talents known as autistic savants verifiably exist in society. For example, Daniel Tammet of England has a diagnosis of autism and has phenomenal abilities to visualize math such as pi up to 22,500 decimal places and taught himself Icelandic in only seven days (Moran and Bourin, 1). Other individuals with a diagnosis of autism have incredible talents that are just as impressive to Tammet. What *Rain Man* did was expose society to a single experience of autism. However, *Rain Man* cannot be taken as the only experience. No single representation can serve as the standard experience and thus the experience must be thought of experiences. Therefore, all representational forms must be viewed collectively to gain a composite portrait of autism.

With each new development or expansion with an autistic character, the concept of autism builds so that our visualization and pre-conceived notion of an autistic is a chimera of produced images. Viewers and readers of society must acknowledge the

diversity and individuality of narratives that are produced. Looking at just three examples, memoir, fictional novel and film, three different experiences are presented. Rather than select one version as the “experience” to measure the other versions against, they all must be read together. Each representation presents an aspect or message on autism that when read independently falls short of the complete autistic experience. What each representation lacks independently is supported and found in the other existing depictions.

## **Conclusion**

Narratives of autism have the grand potential of empowering experiences. Just as easily, narratives can limit the understanding of the experiences by allowing voice to only those in power such as the writers, producers or doctors. The stories no longer belong to Elly or Christopher but are representations as observed by Haddon and Park. . The notion of Foucault’s docile body is reproduced upon the disabled bodies of individuals such as Elly and Christopher who have no authorial power as the observed subject to the initiate discourse of their own autistic experience. In questioning authorial power and voice, the concepts must be further applied in terms of treatment and therapy. The issue now arises of what is best for an individual with autism who may not be able to communicate or understand specific therapies or treatments. Physical therapy, speech therapy and other treatments must all be performed with caution and with the knowledge of authorial execution of the treatment and decision making abilities. Such treatments fall into the discourse of medical terminology that view autism and other disabilities as something to treat and fix which is exactly what disability studies attempts to counter.

Autistic narratives along with other narratives of disability are crucial to disability theory which attempt to understand disabilities outside of the medical terminology and instead in terms of culture, politics and society. As a social construct, our understanding of autism has developed through a series of observations and media that include narratives such as *The Siege* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and films such as *Rain Man*. Despite their individual limitations, when viewed collectively, representations can provide a more composite concept of the possible experiences of autism.

## Works Cited

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV-TR (fourth edition, text revision)*. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000.
- Autism Awareness Association Inc. Autism Frequently Asked Questions. 2007 September. <<http://www.autismawareassoc.org/home>> 20 March 2008.
- Barnes, Colin, Mike Oliver, and Len Barton. Disability Studies Today. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. "The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank." The Eloquent Essay. Ed. John Loughery. New York: Persea Books, 1960.
- Billington, Tom. "Autism: Speculation, Knowledge or Understanding? " Discourse. 27. 2 (2006): 275-285.
- Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Haddon, Mark. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Marks, Deborah. Disability Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- McInerney, Jay. "The Remains of the Dog". The New York Times (June 15 2003), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9905EED81E30F936A25755C0A9659C8B63>
- Moran, Terry and Lenny Bourin. "The Extraordinary Abilities of an Autistic Savant." ABC News. 11 Jun. 2005. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Health/Story?id=830166&page=2> 28 May 2008.
- Park, Clara Claiborne. The Siege. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967.
- Sellick, Clive. "Working with Children, Tom Billington". British Journal of Social Work. 37.5 (2007): 950-951.
- Simpson and Quinn. "Refrigerator Mothers." PBS Point of View Documentary. (2004) <<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/refrigeratormothers/index.html>> 25 March 2008.

Taylor, Steven, Bonnie Shoultz and Pamela Walker. "Disability Studies: Information and Resources." Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability Studies. 28 September 2006. <[http://thechp.syr.edu/Disability\\_Studies\\_2003\\_current.html#Introduction2003](http://thechp.syr.edu/Disability_Studies_2003_current.html#Introduction2003)> 26 May 2008.